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ABSTRACT

David Bartholomae's notion of "Writing on the Margins" is intriguing. He claims that good writers are those who "poise themselves on the margins in a tenuous and hesitant relationship to the language and methods of the university." This paradox is captivating because the margins serve as a place to which one is banished for not knowing the rules--and as a place from which one can earn authority for resisting the rules. Particularly enthralling are the splits--the essays that receive the highest and the lowest scores possible. These essays create gaps in the institutionally "obvious" notions of what constitutes good writing. As an example, in a submission of a feminist reading of "Gorgias" to "Rhetoric Review," two reviewers were at opposite ends of the positive/negative spectrum, one rejecting and the other offering suggestions for revision and resubmission. After submission of the revision, a second set of "conflicting" reviews were offered and a lively discussion about the essay ensued with one of the readers. Why are there not more discussions about what puts pressure on the margins of an individual's scholarly discourse, conversations about subversive practices. Ways to access the disciplinary formations and paradigm shifts that occur when new propositions or ideas put pressure on the boundaries of what reviewers and editors consider to be correct should be considered. (CR)

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ED 411 513

1997 CCCC Session Title:

All the Right Moves:
(Mis)Recognizing (In)Visible Gestures, Blind Review(er)s, and the Myth of Objectivity

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Paper #3:

Inventing Academic Authority: Mapping the Boundaries of Scholarly Discourse

Jane E. Hindman

What I want to do today is record the material circumstances surrounding one scholar's blind submission of an essay entitled "Authorizing Anger: A Personal Encounter with Plato's Gorgias."[1] Let me tell you what's at stake for me here. Stanley Fish would probably say "But isn't it obvious?" Nonetheless, I want to name my bet. I assure you that I'm not simply a disgruntled re-ject. The article I'm going to talk about is--as of January--in [cyberspace] print already. Still, what's at stake for me in this argument is getting published, getting tenured, keeping my job. Sometimes, however, my job makes me crazy: getting my particular kind of work published can be difficult, perhaps because most of what I write now is embodied, is "personal" and therefore political. Apparently, that also renders it marginal. To situate myself, I'll gesture to David Bartholomae, or rather to his gesture to Wayne Booth, by saying that I am going to read "against the grain" of a set of specific disciplinary texts. My purpose is to look at some examples of the discursive conventions that inscribe our discipline, a discipline to which--as I'll show--we blindly submit. Clearly then, my purpose is also to

[1] In cyber print at this address: www.utdallas.edu/pretext/PT1.1/PT1.html

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convince you that something's at stake for you too.

Again, I mention Bartholomae because his notion of "Writing on the Margins" has always intrigued me. He' explained that because basic writers' work puts pressure on what we compositionists see as correct, those writers are marginalized. He also claims that good writers are those who "poise themselves on the margins in a tenuous and hesitant relationship to the language and methods of the university." This paradox captivates me: the margins serve as a place to which one is banished for not knowing the rules AND as a place from which one can earn authority for resisting the rules. Thus, when I participate in holistic grading sessions, positioned at the center of what Freire calls our disabling system, I am particularly enthralled by the "splits," the essays that receive the highest AND the lowest scores possible. These essays create gaps in our institutionally "obvious" notions of what constitutes good writing and enable very important discussion about what we instructors really mean when we say "good." Trouble is, that discussion usually takes place in small and crowded rooms among graders (usually graduate students) not in the pages of journals.

Knowing--as you do now--about my attraction to the destabilizing effects of writing that pushes the envelope, you can perhaps imagine my delight (and dismay) when my feminist reading of Gorgias, which I submitted to Rhetoric Review, received this response from Theresa Enos, Editor:

> Uncharacteristically, the two reviewees are at opposite ends of a positive/negative spectrum. One reviewer does not recommend publication; the other asks you to revise and resubmit and offers extensive suggestions for revision.

> This second reviewer is quite interested in what you are doing.

The very short paragraph response from the rejecting reviewer included these remarks:

> I feel the author has something to say but the 'interpretation'[his quotation marks] of the Gorgias is not the central focus. Much about the views of the Gorgias does [sic] not show a familiarity with a body of important scholarship. . .I also feel that this "reads" [again with the quotation marks] as a spoken convention paper. . I do not. . .feel that the conversational style. . .is the most effective way to present the point.

The other reviewer wrote me four and a half single spaced pages of comments:

> I must begin by confessing [she said] that I feel awkward writing this review, and perhaps just a tad guilty. . . .I fear that trying too hard to make this essay " more scholarly" [she also uses quotes here] will deprive it of its originality and vitality. So I urge you to consider my suggestions and incorporate them into your revision without losing the energy and excitement that drove you to produce the essay to begin with.

Theresa Enos urged me to address these suggestions, to revise and resubmit.

When I submitted the very same essay to College English, I again received one unequivocally negative respoonse and another asking me to "revise slightly." However, editor Louise Smith determined that

> these [slight revisions] seem to me likely to produce a significantly different manuscript. . . .I cannot encourage you to revise and resubmit.

Here's how the decidedly negative referee characterized (as the CE reviewer's form asked) my ability to add "significant ideas. . .to what we generally know about this subject?":

> The author seeks to make a parallel between the shame and humiliation represented as responses of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato's 4thC Greek text and her own anger

> as the victim of masculine argumentative practices in the family and in a particular form of humanities pedagogy. This is too big a leap for my historicist training. . . . Some feminists might cite this article on the basis of the experience recounted. Frankly, it's a bit gossipy for my taste. It also has the flavor of a hero-story. . .how I whipped the big, bad male academic. . . .I would prefer to read an article that took that revelation further through academic materials.

For the other CE reviewer, my piece did not put the same sort of pressure on notion of what constitutes significant knowledge. Nonetheless, her representation of my article is important to present here because it locates within our discursive discourse her reading of and my intention for my essay. She declared that

> rarely has "Why I dislike Socrates" from a postmodern feminist. . perspective been done with as much reflexive detail or performative punch. . . .The discussion is fluent and fun, an exercise in l'ecriture feminine. It is appealing as a feminine riposte directed specifically at gendered elements in Socrates' inter-locutions. I recommend that it be revised slightly to address two issues.

One of those issues was defending more explicitly and upfront my self-reflexivity and performance. The other was strengthening my discussion with references to, among others, Lunsford and Ede's discussion of Aristotle as a noncontentious Rogerian.

I addressed some of these suggestions. I also attended to the provocative question posed by the positive RR reader: "How would you have us rethink or re-perform authority or models of inquiry?"

And so, in my revision, I tried to demonstrate the ways that scholars perform authority and adhere to disciplined models of inquiry. As an example, I referred to my own performance in the very manuscript the reviewers were considering. For instance, in

my revision I cited the CE reviewer's comment about my "heroic" victory over the big bad male academic, explaining in my second version that I had felt defeated by not heroic about the incident. I explained that the reason I had told the story of my apology to the "big bad male academic" in both versions of my essay was that I had seen myself resorting to the same masculinist, humiliating and combative strategies that I'd been subjected and believed to be unethical. I included this explanation in my revision because it contextualized (embodied) my position, namely that conventional strategies for authorizing our disciplinary arguments contort me into practices I neither believe in nor wish to champion.

To bolster my argument further, I presented other examples of writers bending and twisting to fit the limits of disciplinary discourse, namely Lunsford and Ede's article about the contemporary misreadings of Aristotle that a reviewer suggested to me. Here I quote at length from a section of my revised manuscript. Lunsford and Ede's text, I claimed

> reveals. . .the curious shifts and gaps that occur as professional practice challenges discursive conventions. In order to enable their own argument, they [L&E] must demonstrate [that] others' arguments [are] somehow incomplete, distorted, misrepresentative, illogical. Thus, the[y] react to others' "limited reading of Aristotle's Rhetoric" (86) and focus on Bator's in particular. "Clearly [they say,] Bator's argument is self-contradictory" (85).

The context of Lunsford and Ede's discursive move is crucial: their article was written in 1984, a time when the discursive convention that authorizes one argument by claims of contradiction in someone else's was shifting. To at least some of our disciplinary community in 1984, the charge "self-

contradictory" no longer necessarily disabled another's argument. As authors who support feminist beliefs and practices, Lunsford and Ede gesture to this disciplinary shift when they say this:

> The fact that these interpretations are contradictory does not necessarily mean, of course, that they are unreasonable or invalid. . . .Still, the contrast between the two views **is so extreme** as to suggest the possibility that each perspective represents an incomplete view of classical rhetoric. (85 emphasis added)

The gesture to "of course" is interesting since even now--13 years after that article's publication--[some] respected authors do consider contradictory interpretation unreasonable or invalid. Thus, their "of course" functions more as a move to establish a norm than a gesture to an existing one. Most interesting of all to me though was Lundsford and Ede's apparent disinclination to relinquish the authority earned by the "contradictory interpretations" charge: their critique of Bator is authorized by the extremity of the contradictions that Bator makes. Do they mean that moderate self-contradiction is logical but extreme self-contradiction is not?

I explained these things in my revision. And I also said then as I say to you now that "undermining Lundsford and Ede's argument is not my mission here. Instead, I want to recognize their discursive entanglements, their attempts to create new terms and conditions for discourse, to construct gestures to an evolving professional practice but to do so in a way that the "new" moves appear to have always already been there. The convolutions of their text reveal not two feminist authors who are illogical but rather two writers written by the ways that our

discursive practice authorizes.

I submitted the revised piece to RR, and again Theresa Enos explained that she had received "again, 'conflicting' [although this time she put the word in quotation marks] reviews." Here's the second response from the same RR reader who objected to Gorgias' not being the central focus of my first version:

> The essay presents characterizations that are based on stereotypes. Those who disagree are giving into the power structures[;]. . .efforts by others who are not in agreement with the author are "moves" etc. . . .Further, I do not believe that the characterization of the work by Lunsford and Ede as "discursive contortions" is accurate or fair. I hope that the author will see these comments as my fairest and most sincere effort to comment on areas of need and not any sort of statement prompted by any other reasons than the scholarly criteria used to adjudicate an essay's merits.

Do I need to explain why I was shocked by this reader's interpretation of my discussion of authors' "moves"? Okay then, I will: how can it be that a reviewer of a journal called Rhetoric Review, a professional expert whose domain is the analysis of discourse, does not recognize (at least not in this blind review) that anyone writing for the discipline (even someone who agrees with me) is "moving"? How can it be that this reviewer reads my characterization of Lunsford and Ede's "discursive contortions" as unfair when Andrea herself laughed and said "We said that?" when I told her about how I was using her now-dated piece? Why does my decision to analyze rhetorically our discipline's rhetoric so offend him?

Let me hasten to say that my goal is not to disgrace this reader. I read his decision to reject my article as "right" in some sense: his disciplined reading (done in good faith and in the interests of readers of RR) does not accept my "new"

proposition, namely that a feminist response to Gorgias can be, indeed should be, written through the feminist's body and not necessarily through the body of scholarship that has authorized previous readings of that text. Further, I recognize that his gesture to "the scholarly criteria used to adjudicate an essay's merits" shifts agency from his practice of his profession to an immaterial domain within which not he himself but "scholarly criteria"--unstated and unaccountable--survey the work of professionals. Nonetheless, I know for another fact that he IS accountable because I experienced his demonstration of it. Here's how: despite the "blindness" of this review, I deduced the identity of this reader and--at least year's 4c's conference--approached him. I asked if he had indeed read my paper and if he by chance remembered it. He did indeed.

What followed was for me and for him too (at least that's what he said) was a very lively, friendly, and enlightening discussion about my essay, an important conversation that I won't share with you because I'm almost out of time and because I very much appreciate his willingness to be accountable, to explain to me his perspective, one that theretofore had been disembodied and therefore unreal, inconceivable to me. Thus, public display of that conversation is a discursive move I'm not ready to make.

Instead, I'll ask: Why aren't more of us having discussion about what puts pressure on the margins of our own scholarly discourse? A conversation such as he and I had constitutes a "gap" in our consent to disciplinary surveillance, a gap that "converts through 'playful repetition' a form of subordination

into an affirmation and thus seeks to disrupt the traditional discursive economy of a patriarchal, imperialist, heterosexual, capitalist culture."

Does that wording sound familiar? It comes from our first speaker's [William H. Epstein] manifesto of unsanctioned professional practices, his suggested "protocol for an antidisciplinary network of diversionary practices." But since Professor Epstein's words fit him much better than they fit me, I'll try to persuade you to enact that manifesto by asking you this: Do you--do we as disciplined professionals--want to misrecognize the contexts informing our discourse? Do we want reviewers to be the ones deciding how "new" new knowledge can be? Do we want editors alone to determine what we can know about the process and position of submitters and reviewers discourse?

Clearly, the questions are rhetorical. (You're supposed to say no.) Clearly too, it's not possible for each and every one of us work as reviewers and/or editors. Nonetheless, we can at least begin a conversation about the possibilities for subversive practices. We can consider the ways we might stage access to the disciplinary formations and paradigm shifts that occur when new propositions or ideas put pressure on the boundaries of what reviewers and editors consider to be correct. We can teach graduate students strategies for circumventing the constraints of "blind" reviews, the same strategies that full professors use expertly. Most importantly, we could regain our own agency, our capacity to produce new propositions and enact new methodologies. This agency is our only means of intervention in the hegemonic

discourse that inscribes us. We could dispense with the fiction that disciplines us all, a misrecognition that encourages secrecy and paranoia and--by disembodying readers and writers--costs us our very lives. That paralyzing fiction is that our discursive authority resides anywhere other than here and now and with us alone.

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